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ABSTRACT

This study explored the link between parenting style and different types of bullying behaviors. Data were collected from 196 students from 4 schools in London. The mean age of the subjects was 9 years, and the children were of various ethnic origins. Children were asked to nominate whether their peers took part in any of 20 difference types of behaviors related to 6 participant roles: (1) bully; (2) reinforcer; (3) assistant; (4) defender; (5) outsider; and (6) victim. Children were assigned a category based on their highest peer nomination. Children also completed a questionnaire to assess their perception of their parents' parenting style with regard to warmth, accurate monitoring, overprotection, punitiveness, and neglect. A subsample of 39 parents completed a questionnaire measuring parental warmth and restrictiveness. The findings revealed that 27 of the subjects were nominated as bullies, 15 were reinforcer bullies, 12 were assistant bullies, 86 were defenders of the victim, and 35 were victims. Reinforcer bullies scored significantly low on perceived parental warmth. Assistant bullies scored significantly high on perceived parental neglect. Victims scored significantly high on perceived punitiveness. Children nominated as reinforcer bullies also scored significantly high on perceived punitive parenting. Parents viewed themselves as significantly more warm than their children did. Parents of children nominated in the outsider role saw themselves as significantly more nurturant than parents of children in other roles. Parents of victims saw themselves as more restrictive than did parents of children in other roles. (Contains 13 references.) (KB)

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# Parental Style:
## and how it may influence a child's role in bullying

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## Definition

Bullying is surprisingly hard to define as a phenomenon. However, despite the many different definitions given by different researchers there is a general consensus that bullying includes 6 key elements (Farrington, 1993);

- It can include physical, verbal or psychological attack or intimidation;
- The bully is (or is perceived to be) more powerful than the victim;
- The bully intends to cause fear and/or harm to the victim;
- The act is unprovoked by the victim;
- The act is repeated;
- The act produces the desired effect.

Problems can arise when the media, the public, teachers and researchers all mean different things by the term 'bullying'.

## Bullying - The Problem

Bullying is a major problem in British schools, with around 20% of children reporting involvement either as bullies or victims (Whitney & Smith, 1993). School based interventions have had some success in reducing bullying by up to 50% (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Sharp, 1994), but have not been able to eradicate it. There appears to be a ***HARD CORE*** of children who remain unaffected by current intervention strategies. This may be due to personal or family backgrounds that have shaped the child before entering school.

## The Importance of Family

In later childhood the peer group can play a major role in maintaining antisocial behaviour (Patterson, 1989). However, in the pre-school and middle childhood years the parental and family ethos is a key factor in shaping a child's behaviour. Past research has demonstrated a link between restrictive parental style and child social problems. It has been consistently found that overbearing and over controlling parents have children who are more aggressive and less socially skilled than their peers.

## Past Research

Manning et al (1978) found that children with over-controlling or dominating parents were found to harass other children more often at school. Loeber & Dishion (1984) reported that parents who practise inconsistent or highly aversive discipline techniques, coupled with physical punishment, are more likely to have a child who will be aggressive towards others.

More recent research has found similar findings in direct relation to bullying. Olweus (1980, 1993b) has found that over protectiveness in mothers is linked with victim

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status, as was paternal negativism and neglect. Bowers, Smith and Binney (1994) have also found a link between over protective parenting and victimisation (see Smith & Myron-Wilson, 1998 for a full review). This paper will explore the link between parental style and different types of bullying behaviours.

## Hypotheses

*Hypothesis 1*

That children's perceptions of their parents' parental style will differ according to their participant role (involvement) in bullying.

*Hypothesis 2*

That the more children perceive their parents as restrictive the more likely they are to become involved in bullying.

## Participants

Data was collected from 196 school children, from 8 classes (4 schools) local to South East London. Ages ranged from 7y7m to 10y8m (mean age 9y0m). The children were of various ethnic origins, with 50% of Afro-Caribbean origin, 40% Caucasian and 10% Asian. The gender ratio was roughly even, with 52% (102) female and 48% (94) male. Each child was seen individually within the school.

## Measures

***Participant Role Scale (see Sutton, Smith & Sweetenham, 1999)***

Children are asked to nominate whether their peers take part in any of the 20 different types of behaviours 'sometimes' (score 1) or 'more often' (score 2), on six scales; **Bully, Reinforcer, Assistant, Defender, Outsider** and **Victim**. The scores are totalled and divided by the number of nominees to achieve a standardised participant role scale score. Children were assigned a participant role based on their highest peer nomination and were also given a standardised Participant Role Scale score for each of the scales.

***Parental Style Questionnaire (Smith et al, in prep.)***

A measure designed to assess a child's perceptions of their parents style of parenting along five sub-scales; **warmth** (nurturance), **accurate monitoring** (nurturant control), **over protection, punitiveness** (control) and **neglect** (absence of control). There are 30 items in total and each child posts the items into boxes labelled 'a lot like my mum', 'a bit like my mum' and 'not at all like my mum'. From these scores children were given a total score on each of the parental style dimensions.

## Analyses

Using the participant role scale, children were assigned a category according to their highest peer nomination

- 27 children were nominated as bullies, 15 as reinforcer bullies, 12 as assistant bullies,
- 86 children were nominated as defending the victim
- 21 children claimed not be involved in anyway in the situation
- 35 children were nominated as victims

The children were also given a score for each of the participant scales according to the number of peer nominations they received.

## Parental Style and Bullying

Analysis of variance between the participant roles as a main effect accross parental style scores revealed significant differences overall:

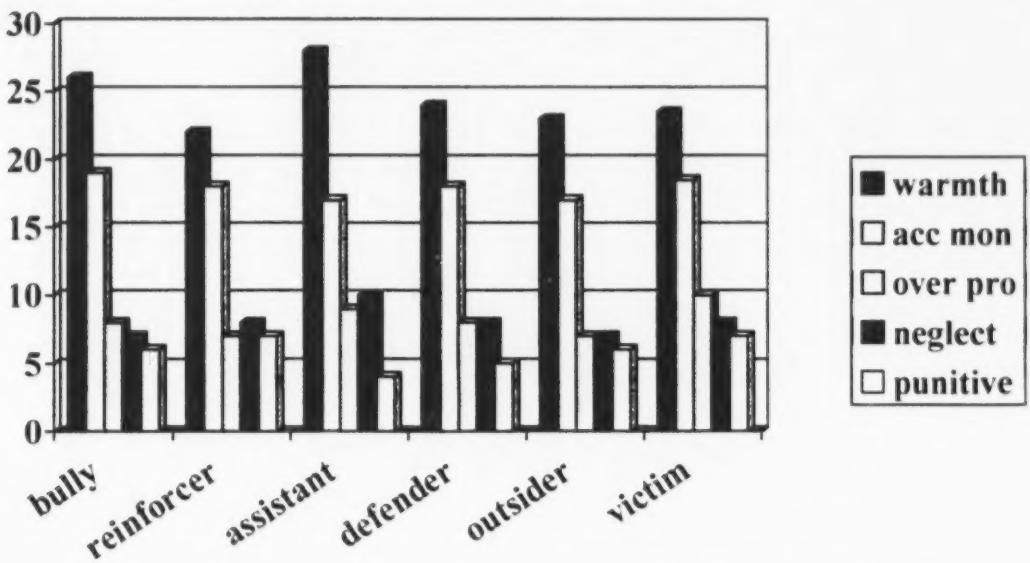
$$F(5, 185) = 6.01, p < .05)$$

Further analyses revealed significant differences between the roles in the warmth scale:

$$F(5, 185) = 2.14, p < .05)$$

Indicating that the perceived amounts of parental warmth displayed by a parent can be an important factor in a child's involvement in bullying.

## Parental Style and Bully Role




## Post hoc analyses

Further post hoc analyses were used to explore the directions of the differences;

reinforcer bullies scored significantly low on warmth

$$t = 4.49 (df 24), p < .05$$

assistant bullies scored significantly high on neglect

$$t = 3.37 (df 109), p < .05$$

victims scored significantly high on punitiveness

$$t = 3.53 (df 44), p < .05$$

Overall this indicates that children involved in bullying perceive their parents as low in warmth and high in punitiveness and neglect.

## Associations between parental style and bullying

Analyses were also conducted examining the associations between the participant role and parental style. Correlational analyses revealed no significant associations for ringleader bullies. However, children who were nominated as reinforcer bullies also scored significantly highly on punitive parenting ($r = .16$, $p < .05$).

## Parental Perceptions

A sub-sample of parents of the children in this study were also contacted. Of the 207 questionnaires sent out, only 39 parents responded. These parents completed the Rickel-Modified Child Rearing Practices Report. This measure consists of 40 statements about parenting behaviours, is marked on a Likert type scale and gives scores on two main dimensions, nurturance (warmth) and restrictiveness (including punitiveness).

## Parental Perceptions & Bullying

Parents saw themselves as significantly more nurturant (warm) overall than their children did. This was found to be true over all the participant roles. However, parents of children nominated in the outsider role (not involved in bullying) saw themselves as significantly more nurturant than in the other roles.

$$(F\ (df\ 11, 19) = 2.17, p < .05)$$

Parents of victimised children scored significantly highly on restrictive parenting

$$(F\ (df\ 11, 19) = 3.49, p < .05)$$

## Conclusions

Hypothesis 1 was supported, children's perceptions of their parents' parental style did differ according to their involvement in bullying. Hypothesis 2 was not supported. Children in the secondary bully roles (as opposed to the primary, ringleader bullies) did appear to see their parents as low in warmth and high in neglect, but not high in restrictive or punitive parenting.

Victims, however, did see their parents as high on punitive parenting. From the parents' perspective (their self reports on their own parenting) victims' parents saw themselves as high on restrictive parenting.

## Discussion

Past research had noted a link between restrictive parenting and aggression in children. This was not found in this study. Ringleader bullies did not see their parents as restrictive. Although other bully roles did perceive their parents as restrictive, as did victims.

The reasons why such differences have been observed in this study are many. One likely explanation is that the more detailed method of categorisation for children involved in bullying has revealed more specific differences in the types of family backgrounds different types of bullies may come from. Alternatively, the measure of parental styles in this study may have been inadequate to assess the concept intended.

A third explanation is that some types of children who bully (ringleader) may have distinctly different profiles compared with that portrayed in past research. Such children may be more aware of the socially desirable answers and be ready to put them forward, regardless of how they actually see their parents.

In sum, this situation appears to be a more complex one than at first perceived, further exploration into the particular parental associates of the different types of bullies is needed.

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